

# CALIFORNIA OCCUPATIONAL GUIDES

## PHYSICAL THERAPISTS

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INTEREST AREA  
MEDICAL OR HEALTH



### WHAT DOES A PHYSICAL THERAPIST DO?

PHYSICAL THERAPISTS are members of a health team that work to restore a patient's physical activity following an accident or illness. Patients include those who have been impaired by birth defects. Therapists help patients overcome disabilities through therapeutic exercise, massage and applications of heat, cold, water, and light. Therapists also participate in case conferences and work under the direction of a physician.

Principal duties of Physical Therapists include:

- Reviewing and evaluating patients' conditions and medical records, performing tests or measurements, interpreting findings, and maintaining documentation.
- Developing programs for treatment plans in keeping with the doctor's directions.
- Helping patients attain maximum muscle strength and motor skills as well as accepting and adjusting to the limiting effects of their disabilities.
- Planning and executing exercises for increasing strength, endurance, coordination, and range of motion.
- Introducing stimuli to facilitate motor activity and learning.
- Instructing in the activities of daily living and use of assistive devices.
- Administering traction, massage, and other treatments such as moist packs, ultraviolet and infrared lamps, and ultrasound machines to improve patient's comfort and aid in recovery.
- Motivating and instructing patients, families, and other caregivers to help patients through the treatment and convalescent period.
- Evaluating the effectiveness of treatment with other team members with an eye towards fine-tuning therapeutic procedures and treatments.

Physical Therapists treat patients with a variety of needs, or may specialize in pediatrics, orthopedics, amputations, arthritis, or paralysis. They may administer physical therapy programs, teach, or work as consultants.

Other members of the team may include a physician, nurse, social worker, psychologist, occupational therapist, and vocational counselor.

## WHAT SKILLS ARE IMPORTANT?

Therapists must have good communication skills and analytical skills, a facility for working with people, as well as working as a member of a health care team. They must be self-starters who are motivated to succeed in an occupation where many clients take months or years to make progress. Therapists must have a sincere interest in people and their welfare. The job requires patience, tact, resourcefulness, and the emotional stability to help patients and their families understand treatments and adjust to handicaps.

Other skills, knowledge, and abilities Physical Therapists need include:

- Reading and Oral Comprehension – Understanding written sentences and paragraphs in work-related documents and the ability to listen to and understand information and ideas presented through spoken words and sentences.
- Judgment and Decision Making – Weighing the relative costs and benefits of a potential action.
- Critical Thinking – Using logic and analysis to identify the strengths and weaknesses of different approaches.
- Service Orientation – Actively looking for ways to help people.
- Identification of Key Causes – Identifying the things that must be changed to achieve a goal.
- Written Expression – The ability to communicate information and ideas in writing so others will understand.
- Oral Expression and Speech Clarity – The ability to communicate information and ideas in speaking so others will understand together with the ability to speak clearly so that it is understandable to a listener.
- Problem Sensitivity – The ability to tell when something is wrong or is likely to go wrong. It does not involve solving the problem, only recognizing there is a problem.
- Medicine – Knowledge of the information and techniques needed to diagnose and treat injuries, diseases, and deformities.
- Therapy and Counseling – Knowledge of information and techniques needed to rehabilitate physical and mental ailments and

to provide career guidance including alternative treatments, rehabilitation equipment and its proper use, and methods to evaluate treatment effects.

## WHAT'S THE WORK ENVIRONMENT?

Physical Therapists generally work in spacious, well-lighted and well-ventilated areas. They usually treat five to fifteen patients each day and may conduct group treatment sessions. The job can be physically exhausting. In addition to standing for long periods of time, Therapists must move equipment and help patients turn, stand, or walk. Although lifting of patients is required, Therapists are trained to lift so that coordination and stamina rather than physical strength are needed. The work of Physical Therapists can also be emotionally demanding and frustrating when little improvement in patients can be observed.

Physical Therapists provide their own uniforms with sleeve emblems identifying their medical specialty. A bathing suit is required if giving treatment in a pool.

According to a recent survey, the most common work setting for Physical Therapists was a private outpatient office or group practice. This was followed by hospital or clinic settings, acute care hospitals, or working in a client's home.

### ***Union Membership***

So far, there has been little or no unionization of Physical Therapists.

## WHAT'S THE CALIFORNIA JOB OUTLOOK?

The following information is from the occupational projections produced by the Employment Development Department's Labor Market Information Division:

Estimated number of workers in 1998:	11,000
Estimated number of workers in 2008:	14,800
Projected Growth 1998-2008:	34.5%
Est. openings due to separations by 2008:	1,900
<i>These figures do not include self-employment.</i>	

Employment is expected to increase at a rate faster than the average for all occupations.

### **Trends**

The demand for these services should increase due to population growth and growth of the aging population, general widespread interest in health, the growth of sports medicine, and as more people exercise and require physical therapy for injuries.

New positions for Physical Therapists will be created as programs to aid disabled persons expand, and as nursing homes and other long-term care facilities provide residents with therapy and rehabilitation services. Increasing care for a growing aging population, whose numbers will rise sharply through the first half of this century, will create further demand for Physical Therapists. Also, many positions for Physical Therapists will result from scientific and technical advances in medicine, which will permit more disabling conditions to be treated.

The nationwide shortages of Physical Therapists in the early 1990s has abated somewhat, and competition now exists for job openings. Currently, the supply of applicants is roughly in balance with the demand for new workers. By 2005, there may be a national surplus of qualified applicants according to a study commissioned by the American Physical Therapy Association. Part of this surplus will be due to qualified Therapists moving to the United States.

### **WHAT DOES THE JOB PAY?**

#### **California Earnings**

Physical Therapists 2001 Wages	
Hourly wages range from	\$26.06 to \$36.61
Average hourly wage	\$31.68
Average annual wage	\$65,894
Source: <i>Occupational Employment Survey of Employers</i> by EDD/LMID.	

Salaries for Physical Therapists are largely dependent upon the worker's length of experience, and vary according to location, experience, and size of hospital or employing agency.

### **Hours**

While Therapists usually work a 40-hour week, their schedules may include some evenings and weekends. About 20 percent of Therapists in a national survey reported working on a part-time basis.

### **Benefits**

Most employers provide benefits such as vacations, sick leave, medical and life insurance, and retirement programs.

### **HOW DO I PREPARE FOR THIS JOB?**

#### **Education and Training**

All accredited physical therapy programs will be at the master's degree level and above by the end of 2001. Twelve California schools offer degrees or certificate programs in physical therapy. Certificates are awarded to students with a bachelor's degree in a related field and who have completed a 12 to 16 month course in physical therapy. The usual curriculum includes courses in neuroanatomy, physiology, biomechanics of motion, human growth and development, and manifestations of disease and trauma. In addition to classroom instruction, student Therapists receive supervised clinical experience as interns in hospitals and treatment centers for an average of 18 weeks. Competition for entry into a physical therapy program is often keen. Top grades in science courses can help improve one's chances.

High school students interested in a career in physical therapy should study biological and physical sciences, as well as mathematics, health, and physical education. Volunteer work in a hospital or summer counseling at a camp for handicapped children can provide helpful experience.

#### **Licensing and Certification**

The Physical Therapy Board licenses Physical Therapists who work in California. Licensing requirements are:

- Graduation from a school of physical therapy, including clinical training, approved by the American Physical Therapy Association.
- Pass a written examination administered by the Physical Therapy Board.
- Be fingerprinted by the Department of Justice.

First-time fees, which include application, license, examination, and fingerprinting are \$601. Licenses must be renewed every two years.

### Continuing Education

California does not require renewing applicants to complete continuing education courses as a condition for license renewal. However, individual employers may impose such a requirement on their own employees.

### HOW DO I FIND THE JOB?

Physical Therapists find jobs with the assistance of school placement offices, professional associations, or through leads in medical journals.

Direct application to employers remains one of the most effective job search methods. Private firms are listed in the yellow pages under Physical Therapy, Hospitals, and Rehabilitation services. California job openings can be found at various online job-listing systems including CalJOBS<sup>SM</sup> at [www.caljobs.ca.gov](http://www.caljobs.ca.gov) or at America's Job Bank at [www.ajb.dni.us](http://www.ajb.dni.us).

For other occupational and wage information and a listing of the largest employers in any county, visit the Employment Development Department Labor Market Information Web page at [www.calmis.ca.gov](http://www.calmis.ca.gov). Find further job search assistance from your nearest Job Service office [www.edd.ca.gov/jsloc.htm](http://www.edd.ca.gov/jsloc.htm) or the closest One-Stop site listed on the California WorkNet site, [www.sjtcc.ca.gov/sjtccweb/one-stop](http://www.sjtcc.ca.gov/sjtccweb/one-stop).

### WHERE CAN THIS JOB LEAD?

Promotional avenues in the private sector are basically unstructured and advancement in government service requires success on promotional examinations. In both private and public sectors, experience and ability are the keys to advancement. An advanced degree in physical therapy is sometimes a prerequisite for appointment to supervisory, administrative, teaching, or research positions. Some Therapists set up a private practice and accept patients referred by local physicians.

### OTHER SOURCES OF INFORMATION

American Physical Therapy Association  
1111 North Fairfax Street  
Alexandria, VA 22314-1488  
(800) 999-2782  
(703) 684-2782  
[www.apta.org](http://www.apta.org)

Physical Therapy Board  
1418 Howe Avenue, Suite 16  
Sacramento, CA 95825-3204  
(916) 263-2550  
[www.ptb.ca.gov](http://www.ptb.ca.gov)

Employment Projections by Occupation  
[www.calmis.ca.gov/htmlfile/subject/occproj.htm](http://www.calmis.ca.gov/htmlfile/subject/occproj.htm)

Employment and Wages by Occupation  
[www.calmis.ca.gov/file/occup\\$/OES\\$.htm](http://www.calmis.ca.gov/file/occup$/OES$.htm)

### RELATED OCCUPATIONAL GUIDES

Occupational Therapists	No. 143
Physical Therapy Aides and Assistants	No. 451
Chiropractors/Doctors of Chiropractic	No. 547

### OCCUPATIONAL CODE REFERENCES

**SOC** (*Standard Occupational Classification*)  
Physical Therapists 29-1123

**O\*NET** (*Occupational Information Network*)  
Physical Therapists 29-1123.00

**OES** (*Occupational Employment Statistics*)  
Physical Therapists 32308

**DOT** (*Dictionary of Occupational Titles*)  
Physical Therapists 076.121-014